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# Education: A Universe of Discourse

by  
Brenda S. Engel

*"We deliver excellence for less"--motto on  
the side of a U.S. Post Office delivery van.*

In education, as in other professional fields, the development of special language has noticeably speeded up since World War II. New words and new phrases turn up in public discourse and, as we get used to them and as they inevitably begin to shape our view of the field, we forget they haven't always been there; they become the terms in which we think about education.

*"The current rhetoric in education bears the unmistakable signs of lessons learned from public relations and advertising..."*

The relatively rapid change in language over the last forty years can be seen in part as a result of advances in the technology of mass communications but in part, too, the result of equally dramatic advances in a relatively modern art form--or craft: that of influencing mass response to ideas and events through manipulation of language itself, through both the invention of new words and the reapplication of old ones. This article attempts to describe the ways in which the language of education has changed and to examine some of the reasons why.

To begin with, the current rhetoric in education bears the unmistakable signs of lessons learned from public relations and advertising (industries which have been on the cutting edge of the development and exploitation of language manipulation techniques): more influenced by strategies and purposes than by knowledge and experience. Words like "excellence," and "rigor," and phrases like "basic skills," "minimum competencies," "cognitive goals," and "academically gifted" have the ring of salesmanship. They freight the subjects in particular ways which betray an altered relationship between language, at least public language, and experience. In subtle ways, as professional language has been

influenced increasingly by purpose rather than experience, it has become redirected from the past to the future much as the American heroic ideal has shifted from the Lone Ranger to Luke Skywalker--the one "a champion of justice...in the thrilling days of yesteryear," and the other operating in a setting not yet invented.

The history of language, its changes and development, is intertwined with human history. Words accrue meanings, or lose them, in response to how individuals and society perceive what is going on around and among them; words in turn influence how these events are actually seen and understood. In this way, language remains in touch with the times, up to date in usage although lagging a bit in dictionary definition; dictionaries as the conservers of language are, quite reasonably, slow to admit neologisms.

The 1984 edition of the ERIC Thesaurus describes the slightly conflicted functions of printed repositories of language: "This 10th edition is the result of ERIC's continued efforts to maintain quality in its controlled vocabulary and to respond to the changing nature of education."<sup>1</sup> Lexical (or dictionary) meaning acts as a kind of brake on what might otherwise be over-rapid change; over-rapid because quickly developing special vocabulary--slang, professional usage, in-group language--works against generally shared understanding which, at best, takes a while to catch up.

*"The new professional words and phrases tend to be shiny although banal. They've gathered no moss."*

Because of their programmatic introduction into the profession, the fact that they are in front or ahead of the thinking which they are meant to influence, up there with Luke Skywalker, the new professional words and phrases tend to be shiny although banal. They've gathered no moss. For over a century children in public schools have been learning to read, write and do arithmetic. The relatively recent renaming of these achievements "basic skills" influences how we regard them; an imperative is built in. At the same time, the new terms are less specific, less clearly understood than the old ones. People are not sure what is or what should be included as a "basic skill." Language has run ahead of meaning.

A related variety of language manipulation is the forced transfer of words from one context, in which they have grown, to another. Real estate provides a case in point: the importation of the word "home" to mean "house." "Home" brings with it associations of character, warmth, coziness, stability, refuge, safety and so on; a house is presumably more easily sold when advertised as a "home" even though the implied qualities are



unearned and what's up for sale is in fact simply a house. Such words and phrases, however, once they've been transplanted into foreign soil, soon lose flavor. "Home" eventually becomes a banal word conveying actually less than "house" in spite of the intended carry-over of feeling and meaning.

Much invented and artificially naturalized language tends to be thin, to imply, invoke, cast an aura rather than say something as well as possible. I've suggested two closely related reasons for this impoverishment: first, that meaning itself has not accrued, over time, in the usual way; secondly, that when context is as yet unrealized, language is influenced by programmatic assertion rather than by experienced reality. Words and phrases are used to project images, feelings--an illusion of meaning ("We Deliver Excellence for Less").

Language, according to Owen Barfield,

*has two primary functions, one of which is expression and the other communication. They are not the only functions language performs, but they are both indispensable to its existence. The goal to which expression aspires, or the criterion by which it must be measured, is something like fullness or sincerity. The goal toward which communication aspires is accuracy. Both functions must be performed in some degree--and at the same time--otherwise there is no language at all.*<sup>2</sup>

Going by Barfield's criteria, one could say that, in public discourse about education, there is virtually "no language at all."

It seems useful, at this point, to look at some of the language currently in evidence in the field of education. It's actually not the more concrete words like house/home--or in this case, desk, textbook, chalk--which interest me but rather those that Raymond Williams refers to in Key Words as "words of a different kind and especially...those which involve ideas and values..."<sup>3</sup>

In order to point up the romantic, "essentially feudal" nature of rhetoric used during the First World War, Paul Fussell created a "table of equivalents": ordinary language in one column, the "raised" language of the 1914-1918 period in an opposite one. A "friend," for example, becomes a "comrade," a horse a "steed" and the enemy becomes the "foe." Comparison of the two columns reveals the pattern of intention behind the new vocabulary: to whip up energy and enthusiasm for the battle, for going off to fight on the continent even

though the likelihood of also dying there was stunningly high.<sup>4</sup>

My own "table of equivalents," a small selection from a long list of possibilities, has in the first column some "raised" words and phrases common to the current discourse on education, and in the column opposite, the roughly equivalent terms used before the new ones came in. An analysis of the words in the lefthand column and a comparison of the two columns will reveal some suggestive patterns, something about what lies behind the kind of education being promoted.

TABLE OF EQUIVALENTS

Basics	3 R's
Minimum Competencies	Passing scores in required subjects
Excellence (in education)	Quality education
Academically gifted	Successful students
Cognitive goals	Book learning
Dyslexia	Word blindness
Time on task	Time spent on paperwork

The first three terms in the lefthand column all have to do with keeping up expectations: on the one hand, putting a floor under acceptable achievement levels and, on the other, holding out a shining, albeit largely substanceless, vision of possibility.

"Basics" is shorthand for basic skills which are defined in the ERIC Thesaurus as "Fundamental skills that are the basis of later learning and achievement." The term has been around for a relatively long time, at least as long as the Thesaurus itself which was first published in 1966. The concept of basic skills gained popularity, however, in the early seventies, probably because of the widespread influence of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.<sup>5</sup> It's a truism that in the last seven years, anyone applying for a grant in education has failed to make some mention of basic skills at his/her peril.

"Back to Basics," the related action-oriented slogan and conservative rallying cry, came in, according to the Thesaurus, in the early 70s, in the service of "an educational movement stressing basic skills, achievement and accountability begun...as a protest against school permissiveness and declining student performance."

The sense of moral pressure the term "basic skills" brings with it is palpable. The pressure seems to steam up from an underground reservoir of mainly unarticulated,

*"The sense of moral pressure the term 'basic skills' brings with it is palpable."*



although readily recognizable, values--the traditional and literally conservative values of home, family and country. "Back to Basics" indicates a desire for stronger discipline, fewer choices. Its advocates have little interest in or patience with individual differences, eccentricities of the imagination, non-utilitarian learning. Students are expected to "shape up," the curriculum, to eliminate "frills." A puritan ethic can be sensed here, favoring an education which is often dry and dismal though worthy and certainly economical.

In spite of the implication that we all know what is meant by "basics," confusion and disagreement exist. Computer literacy, for instance, although clearly never a part of the traditional curriculum, is often, these days, included as a basic skill, even in the elementary grades. Education in the arts, considered by many, including this writer, to be absolutely basic to effective schooling, is usually the first thing to go in budget cutbacks.

Although the Thesaurus warns that basic skills are not to be "confused with minimum competencies," the two are closely related. Minimum competencies are defined as "Skills that are deemed essential for a given age, grade or performance level." In practice, they are basic skills codified and invoked for purposes of enforcement, basic skills further divided, quantified and made testable. "Minimum competency" is a recently arrived, although very influential, term in the discourse on public education. Even more confusion surrounds it than surrounds "basic skills" and all the difficulties which might have been anticipated have already arisen over the relationship between competencies, educational background and local culture--whether competencies can, in fact, be abstracted, made uniform across the board and reliably tested regardless of individual differences in belief, language, interests, preferences, experience and schooling.

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"Excellence" is a prototypical PR word in that it suggests meaning but in fact conveys only attitude. Nobody can be against "excellence" in part because nobody knows what it is and in part because it suggests something strenuous, upbeat, worthy of our best efforts --in short, something we have to be in favor of. Once we looked to the schools to provide "a good sound education" or "quality education." We now demand only the best, that all the boys and girls, like those in Lake Wobegone, be "above average." Although, by Barfield's criteria, this particular example of the new language is neither accurate nor sincere, as a rallying cry, the call for "excellence" has evoked widespread and, to me, surprisingly serious response from educational administrators and the research establishment.

Cognitive goals also have to do with our ambitions for school children although, in this case, more with process (I think) than subject matter. The Thesaurus, sounding hard put, defines them as "behavioral objectives that emphasize remembering or reproducing something which has presumably been learned or that involves the solving of some intellectual task."

Benjamin Bloom first systematized cognitive goals in a widely influential handbook, A Taxonomy of Educational Objectives; the Classification of Educational Goals<sup>6</sup>. Volume I of the Taxonomy identifies and elaborates on goals in the "cognitive domain," Volume II in the "affective domain." In Volume I the goals are grouped into six hierarchically arranged classes--from the bottom up: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The educational rationale for the hierarchy is that, "As we have defined them, the objectives in one class are likely to make use of and be built on the behaviors found in the preceding classes on this list."<sup>7</sup> The Taxonomy was intended to help "curriculum builders...specify objectives so that it becomes easier to plan learning experiences and prepare evaluation devices."

Both the concept of a taxonomy and the word itself are derived from the natural sciences, specifically Linnaeus' monumental mid-eighteenth century work on classification of flora. Bloom (a striking name in this connection) introduces his book with an acknowledgment of the derivation: "Most readers will have heard of the biological taxonomies which permit classification into such categories as phylum, class, order..." etc.<sup>8</sup> Taxonomies sort out, order, and make areas of experience generally comprehensible in the interest of intellectual control.

The term "gifted" used to be reserved for artists, writers and musicians. Recently the adjective has been applied more broadly to include "persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance."<sup>9</sup> The U.S. Office of Education, after grappling for several years with a definition of giftedness, came up in 1972 with six different areas in which a person can be gifted: (1) general intellectual, (2) specific academic, (3) creative or productive thinking, (4) leadership, (5) visual and performing art, and (6) psychomotor ability. A note of caution, however, is sounded by the authors of the Encyclopedia article quoted above: "A definition of giftedness must begin by clearly distinguishing between proficiency in lesson learning and test taking on the one hand and innovative behavior and creative productive accomplishments on the other."<sup>10</sup> In practice, academic giftedness is in fact largely determined by scores on standardized tests.



The use of the term "gifted" is clearly an example of a term being transferred from one context--the mysterious world of creative genius--to another, an academic context in which, despite the attention paid to definitions, its meaning has become confused and subject to political manipulation: the "academically gifted" can usually be redefined for the occasion according to local political needs and purposes.

Dyslexia is one of those words which, because of its Greek derivation, sounds medical and diagnostic; it is in fact merely a designation, not an explanation. The Thesaurus defines dyslexia with admirable economy and lack of pretension as "impairment in the ability to read despite adequate intelligence and proper instruction." The authors of Key Words in Education give a slightly peevish and more skeptical definition: "A disability supposedly resulting from lesions in some part of the brain which interfere with the ability to read."<sup>11</sup>

The term "dyslexia" is often used to explain children's difficulties in learning to read: "He has dyslexia" or "She's dyslexic." Parents and other non-professionals tend to be impressed by the sound of the word, believing it describes a pathology which has been both identified and at least partially understood by professionals, like pneumonia or anemia. Parents even frequently believe dyslexia to be contagious or treatable with drugs. Unexplained inability to read was once called "word-blindness," a term as adequate as "dyslexia" and perhaps less misleading.

"Time on task" is a central concept in Mastery Learning, a pedagogical method which gained influence in the early 1970s. Benjamin Bloom, John B. Carroll and others popularized the idea that anyone can learn but some take a longer time. Thus the element of time--the minutes and hours actually spent "on task"--along with natural aptitude become the significant factors in academic success. "Assuming that aptitude determines the rate of learning, most students can achieve mastery if they are allowed and do spend the necessary amount of time on a learning task."<sup>12</sup> The idea has the appeal of simplicity even though it doesn't always work out in practice. It's difficult to know when a child is "on task;" he or she can appear to be working on long division problems while his or her mind is off on the baseball diamond, home with mother or out in space with Luke Skywalker.

These are where the words and phrases come from. What, then, inspired their introduction into education?

I could expand the list to include such words as "remediation" (extra help), "study skills" (concentration), or "at risk" (likely to have problems at school). Even with my limited list, however, the pattern becomes clear. First, the overall tone of the new language implies the possibility of control over a socializing process, education, which to the public seems much of the time out of control. The introduced language is more technical, more special than the old; we find fewer words we are likely to use comfortably in other connections or encounter in other areas of experience, like "learning," "blindness," "scores." Instead, we have "cognitive goals," "dyslexia" and "minimum competencies." It's as though "they," the language makers, are assuring "us," the public, that the situation is under control, that "they" now know what "they" are doing; that, as in science, special standards and techniques exist, understood by experts which, if properly applied, will make education an orderly, predictable and manageable process.



Such words and phrases have come to education with overtones of business ("goals"), medicine ("dyslexia") and the military ("time on task")--all pragmatic, down-to-earth, no-nonsense areas of human activity. Significantly, we find no language or metaphors from the arts, religion or philosophy, areas in which the illusion of certainty and control is more difficult to put across. One could say we have traded the values of insight and understanding for claims of systematization and control.

To summarize, education, along with the other social sciences, has fallen victim to positivism and, in the process, has become a pseudo-science rather than the art it once was.<sup>13</sup> Language is being used to support the illusion of education as technology with its roots in science. Rather than describing prevailing beliefs, the current language is intended to create them. Only the substance is still lacking.

For the sake of symmetry and with no intention to scapegoat the U.S. Post Office, I will end this essay with an anecdote which sums up my thinking about the language of educational discourse: a friend received, in his mail delivery, a worn piece of brown wrapping paper with a bit of twine stapled to one corner. Next to his name and address handwritten on the paper was an official U.S. Post Office message stamped boldly in red ink: "PACKAGE DELIVERED WITHOUT CONTENTS."

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors, 10th edition. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1984, Preface p. vii. All subsequent references to the Thesaurus in this article will be found in this edition.

<sup>2</sup>Barfield, Owen, Speaker's Meaning. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup>This essay is heavily indebted to three books: Speaker's Meaning by Owen Barfield (footnote #2), Keywords by Raymond Williams, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, and The Great War and Modern Memory by Paul Fussell, New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

<sup>4</sup>Fussell, op.cit., p. 21.

<sup>5</sup>See Hawes, G. R. and L. S. Hawes, The Concise Dictionary of Education; New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1982, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>A Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Benjamin Bloom, Ed. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1956.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup>Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Vol. 2; American Educational Research Association, Harold E. Mitzel, Ed. New York: The Free Press, 1982.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 724.

<sup>11</sup>Collins, K. T., L. W. Downes, S. R. Griffiths, K. E. Shaw, Key Words in Education; London: Longmans Group Ltd., 1973, p. 217.

<sup>12</sup>Bloom, Benjamin, "Mastery Learning," p. 54; Mastery Learning Theory and Practice, James H. Block, Ed. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

<sup>13</sup>Suzanne Langer, in Mind, an Essay on Human Feeling (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967, Volume I), lists five "idols of the laboratory" characteristic of the social sciences in their efforts to be validated as sciences: physicalism, jargon, methodology, objectivity, mathematization. All of these are evidenced in the new discourse on education.